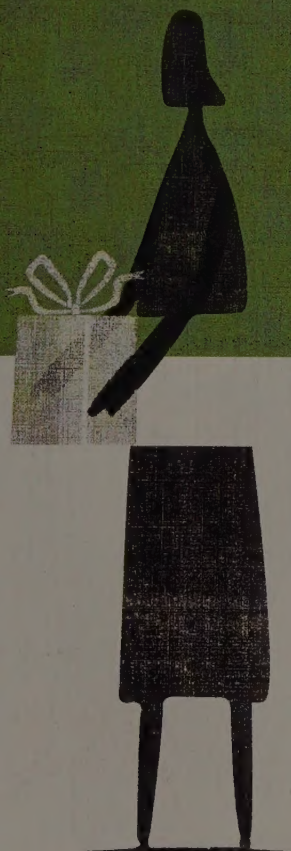


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December 2007

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Light, Glass, and Fire  
Sharing the Yoke of Jesus

When Words Collide  
Holy Conversation





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## MEEK AND MIGHTY

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 10 DECEMBER 2007

Jesus is the meekness of God made flesh—power held in check. We learn from Jesus how to take the “wimp factor” out of being meek.

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VOICES

## Meek and Mighty

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

**“You’re blessed when** you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought” (Matthew 5:5, *The Message*).

At this time of year, it’s not so easy to be content. Television ads and shopping malls plant the idea that we should want *more*—we should want the picture-perfect holidays that we imagine other people are having and that we see on TV. We want to buy (and get) gifts that *wow*. And we want to host the meals and parties that *wow*. In the midst of all that *wow*, this Beatitude speaks a radically different idea: Blessed are the *meek*—not the wealthy, not the stylish, not the powerful. It’s not about being impressive.

In this session of the Bible study, writer Martha Stortz helps us understand the biblical idea of meekness by looking at two important men in the Bible—Moses and Jesus. In comparing their stories, we learn about meekness as tempered strength, power held in check.

In “When Words Collide” on p. 22, Elyse Nelson Winger reflects on the “act boldly” theme of Women of the ELCA and writes, “Jesus did not say: Blessed are the bold. . . . So, what does Scripture really say about meekness? And what is its relationship to boldness?”

The faith practice in this month’s Bible study is focused on “Holy Conversation.” Peter Marty reminds us that in this world where nasty speech so often gets the upper hand, “Kindness makes for holy conversation. If we want to get

anywhere in life, we are often told to be tough and cold in our dealings. . . . Being tough is relatively simple; showing kindness takes far more courage.”

We learn that kindness, that meekness, by sharing the yoke of Jesus. Catherine Malotky asks in her article on p. 14, “Do we not carry, deep in our bones, the idea that security and happiness are the goal and that we can buy these things for ourselves and those we love?” She reminds us that “We can choose another kind of strength, tempered and sure, yoked to the One whose wisdom and welcome is unfailing.”

In Advent we hear the words of the prophets, speaking of the coming messiah. Lita Brusick Johnson gives us insight into what it means to be prophetic in “Light, Glass, and Fire,” on p. 6. She writes that it helps to think about “prophets as fragile pieces of glass that reflect, refract, collect, and focus God’s light. Their importance is not in themselves, but in what the Light does with and through them.”

Finally on p. 36, Kathleen Kastilahn reassures those of us who are overburdened and stressed this holiday season: “I bring good news: You can’t make this the ‘best Christmas ever.’ You can’t—no matter how much you bake, wrap, decorate, party, give, visit, sing, worship, or even do acts of love. You can’t, because God already did, 2,000 years ago and every year since. And God will do it again this year.” 🌿

**Kate Sprutta Elliott** is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You can write to her at [LWT@elca.org](mailto:LWT@elca.org).





GIVE US THIS DAY

## My friend Doris and I

were town girls. We married farmers. We complained a lot, but we made do with oil lamps and outdoor plumbing. We carried water from the well to the house and then back out again. Wash day was a two-day affair. The wash boiler on the stove had to be filled so that it could begin to heat up first thing in the morning. The gas-powered washing machine had to be brought in from the cold porch the night before, in hopes that a night in the kitchen would warm its inner parts so that it would start. Mostly it didn't. After sorting the laundry into little piles all over the kitchen and dining room floors, we were ready.

We filled the rinse tubs and got the clothes lines ready. In the dead of winter, when the temperature was nearer 30 below than 30 above, we hung our clothes lines in the spare bedrooms and the hallways upstairs.

Then we got the miracle—electricity.

In our enlightened age Doris would call on Tuesday mornings and with a little giggle, she would ask, "What are you doing?"

It was such fun to say that I was both washing clothes and talking to her at the same time.

And then she always said, "I feel sorry for people who have always had it so good!" People who never feel a rush of gratitude when hot water comes from a faucet right there in the house. Who never give thanks for the washing machine humming in the basement. One of the great gifts of life is the memory of

harder times that builds gratitude into thanksgiving.

Some of our memories are of disasters that still occur with frightening regularity. We remember standing in the doorway and watching hail bounce in the yard and fields and destroy our income for the year. The smell of crushed grass and pounded cornstalks is pungent; our children need help to equate that peril with the perils of city life. And we need help to remember that they, too, are making memories for their children. All the generations need the meekness that comes with the years and the birthday cakes. The gift of life, however long, is blessing and not burden.

We don't plan to flatten ourselves into one-dimensional figures always talking about the past. It takes a great deal of meekness to give space in our conversations for the present and the future—yet that is where the blessings are.

We own our past. That is why it is so fascinating to us. We are aware that we don't own much of the present. The TV news makes us heartsick. We want to confess our sins of mayhem and degradation and environmental destruction. Yet much of the beauty survives for another day and another generation. To see a yellow rose unfold is to be reminded that God is in charge. We may assist with shovel and a little plant food, but we say in all humility, "This is God's creation." We have been blessed for as many years as we have been given. 🌿

**Marj Leegard** and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

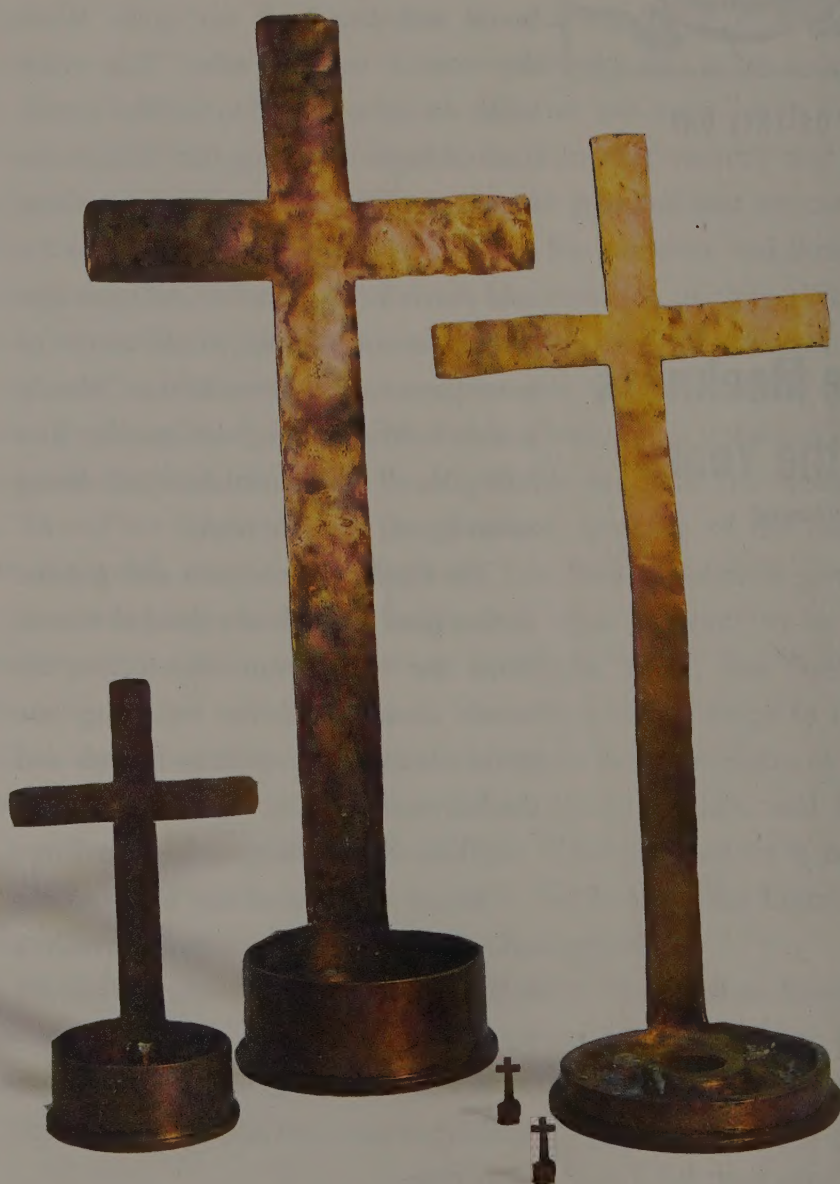
## The Meekness of the Years

by Marj Leegard



# LIGHT, GLASS, AND FIRE

by Lita Brusick Johnson



Have you ever talked with a person whose every sentence begins with *I*? “I am. . .” “I did. . .” “I think. . .” That’s bad enough in casual conversations. But it’s absolutely deadly in someone who claims to be *prophetic*.

And there are lots of people making that claim today! A two-second Web search yields 7 million links to occult, Muslim, Christian, and other “prophetic” sites (some complete with animated crackling flames).

*Photo: Brass crosses made out of artillery shell casings from the Liberian civil war.*



Church folks often think of the Old Testament prophets who pointed to the coming of Christ. But being *prophetic* means more than reading the tea leaves of the future. *Prophetic*, from its Greek root, describes one who speaks before the people, who speaks for God. It's an amazing concept: God using human beings to declare God's judgment and intent in ways that change lives, spark action, overturn unjust systems, and lead to reconciliation. The prophetic voice is a gift of *God* that tears down and builds up. It shapes and re-shapes Christian community, even as it advances justice and wholeness.

But sometimes individuals equate their will with God's will, their voice with God's voice. The claim to speak for God has at times resulted—literally—in crackling flames for those who did not agree. Today, too, we hear preachers and their followers declaring “Thus saith the Lord!” Many vehemently denounce not only “sin” but also specific “sinners” whom they threaten with the direst of punishments. Sometimes it's hard to figure where egos end and God begins.

*Prophetic* is a word used in Washington, D.C., too. When I worked for our church's advocacy office, I grew weary of Christians from all sides of the political spectrum declaring that their position on a particular bill was “prophetic.”

That's a real discussion stopper! For if *I* say “Thus saith the Lord,” *you* must be speaking against God if you don't agree with every nuance of my position.

How then, in the Babel of claims to be prophetic, can we resist the urge to clap our hands over our ears to shut out all the confusing voices? How do we discern the truly prophetic word, the gift of God, amidst all the chaotic chatter?

We get some clues about what it means to be prophetic as we light the candles of our Advent wreaths and hear words spoken by Old Testament prophets about God's light in the midst of this world's darkness. We remember John the Baptist, who called people to repentance and pointed toward Jesus. They illustrate clearly that there is no *I* in prophet. Prophets always point to the Other.

So how might we discern how God is speaking to us today? It helps me to think of “I-less” prophets as fragile pieces of glass that reflect, refract, collect, and focus God's light. Their importance is not in themselves, but in what the Light does with and through them.

### LIKE A MIRROR

**Prophets reflect light, to help us see *what is*.** The prophetic word is like a mirror that uses light to reflect back to us *what is*. God's light comes to us through observation and reason,

and prophetic mirrors reveal truths that make us uncomfortable, truths that reveal inconsistencies between what we say and what we do. Mirrors expose truth. When I see myself in the prophetic mirror, I see myself and my actions revealed as what they really are—whether I am truly choosing to love my neighbor as myself or simply walking by on the other side of the road, allowing suffering to go on while I protect my carefully nurtured appearance.

Mirrors are necessary, for to change reality we must first see *what is* clearly. But mirrors alone can drive us to despair, like Don Quixote encircled by mirrors. Mirrors alone are not sufficient.

### LIKE A PRISM

**Prophets refract light like a prism, to help us imagine *what can be*.** Prisms bend light to show the rainbow of colors that make up white light. Just so, prophets reveal that there is more to God than blinding light and harsh judgment. Prophets point to God's reconciling intent. They point to God's love, expressed in Christ Jesus. The Old Testament prophets cast a vision that still rings true: a world where faithfulness is the norm, where widows, orphans, and the most vulnerable can expect fair treatment, where all made in God's image have the basics of life. The prism's rainbow proclaims God's promises that give hope for



the future to those who know that God has more in mind than simply *what is*.

Prophets both reflect and refract God's light. For if judgment without vision leads to despair, vision without judgment leads to pious platitudes. Prophets help us both to see clearly what is and to imagine what can be. They live in the tension between judgment and vision . . . between the law and grace . . . between what is and what should be.

### LIKE A TELESCOPE

**Prophets collect light, to help us discern *what to do and how to do it*.** Living in that tension, some prophets are like the glass lenses of telescopes. The more light such lenses gather, the brighter is the image seen. Such prophets gather knowledge, energy, wisdom, and resources from all directions. They collect light to help us see clearly what can be accomplished in that middle ground between current reality and vision. They focus on *what* and *how*: specific actions that make the church more faithful and society more just.

### LIKE A SPARK

**Prophets focus light, to spark action in community.** The prophetic word is like a magnifying glass. Every Girl Scout knows that such a lens can concentrate sunlight in one spot to kindle a flame for a campfire. Some prophets have the gift of focus-

ing God's light in ways that spark wildfire movements for renewal and change within church and society.

### PIECES OF GLASS

Prophets are like fragile but essential pieces of glass, not noteworthy in themselves. They are a powerful witness when they reflect, refract, collect, and focus the light of God. By God's grace, prophets are everywhere, if we have ears to hear and eyes to see. Some examples:

> Artist Wendy Brusick, a member of Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Warwick, Rhode Island, holds up a mirror to those of us in the "shop 'til you drop" sorority. She invites us to see *what is*: the consumerism in our culture that consumes us. Her sculpture features an old cast-iron scale. On one side of the balance is a glittering mound of money, rhinestones, tiny cars, and credit cards. But this glitzy monument is outweighed by a feather-light word painted in red on the other side of the balance—*tekel*, a word of judgment the prophet Daniel interpreted to King Belshazzar: "You have been weighed and found wanting." What is the handwriting on *our* wall?

> During the brutal Liberian civil war, God's light was refracted into a rainbow of hope when it passed through the prism of George Kolle. His home had been shelled and his father and several siblings were killed as the family fled. In a crowd-

ed refugee camp, George spoke for God with his hands. He cut into spent brass artillery shell casings that had been harvested from the killing fields and straightened the curved surfaces to fashion crosses. (See the photo on page 6.) Forming the symbol of God's love from the very weapons that killed his family, George witnessed to the God of hope, who wills reconciliation in the midst of violence.

> U2's lead singer, Bono, gathers light from all sectors of society to telescope the global community's attention toward an achievable goal: reducing by half the number of extremely poor and hungry people by 2015. Powered by the sweeping vision of God's justice, Bono uses his celebrity to raise awareness about poverty and HIV/AIDS in Africa, engaging with anyone and everyone who can make a difference: from business leaders to youth, from President Bush to the editor of *Vanity Fair*. He cajoles the leaders of wealthy nations to make specific changes in aid, trade, and debt policy that reduce the burdens on the poorest countries. He's brought visibility to the One Campaign to Make Hunger History (of which the ELCA is a part; see [www.elca.org/advocacy/one](http://www.elca.org/advocacy/one)). In the middle ground between reality and vision, Bono encourages each and every person to take specific actions that do make a difference.



> Leymah Gbowee is like glass that focuses light on tinder. Her actions in 2002–2003 helped spark a protest movement that helped end the decade-long civil war in Liberia. Leymah is a mother, a Lutheran woman of no particular authority or power, who said, “No more!” She literally sat down and invited others to sit down with her. Women linked arms with women and sat down at the airport, in front of government facilities, in the rebel strongholds.

Women of the Lutheran Church in Liberia joined hands with Muslim women, protesting for peace. “Our faith became the light of our journey,” Leymah says. “Lying on our bellies with our backs to the sun, fasting and praying, was the position that puzzled a lot of people, including former President Charles Taylor. We wore sackcloth and ashes for six months while acting for peace,” facing guns and whips and bribes. These women’s

simple relentless action helped force the two sides into a ceasefire.

In this Advent season, as we light the candles and rejoice in the Light that dispels this world’s darkness, we pray: *Stir up, O Lord, your power and come.* Come to us. Speak to us. And give us ears to hear the prophets in our midst through whom your voice speaks today. 🌿

**Lita Brusick Johnson** is associate executive director and director for international programs in ELCA Global Mission.



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## CALENDAR NOTES

# December

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley  
from sources including Evangelical  
Lutheran Worship (ELW), Sundays  
and Seasons, and Lutheran Book  
of Worship (LBW), published by  
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers  
([www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org))

This month sees the beginning of not only a new liturgical year, but also a new liturgical season—Advent. And then the 12 day season of Christmas!

## 2 First Sunday of Advent

Today we put up the blue paraments and open a new volume of the three-year lectionary—Year A. Today's texts are Isaiah 2:1–5; Romans 13:11–14; and Matthew 24:36–44.

The Advent hymn “Wake, awake, for night is flying” (*ELW* 436; *LBW* 31) was written by Philipp Nicolai in about 1598 during an epidemic. Clearly expecting death, he wrote that he meant to leave this hymn behind as “a token of my peaceful, joyful, Christian departure.” But the plague passed him by and he lived another 10 years.

## 7 Ambrose, bishop of Milan

It took a week (and the Emperor's command) to get the noble Roman governor to agree to the people's wish that he be their bishop, and then baptize him, ordain him, and prepare him for his new office. Ambrose was consecrated bishop on this date in the year 374.

Ambrose wrote many hymns to strengthen believers' faith in times of adversity (much as Martin Luther did), including “Savior of the nations, come” (*ELW* 263; *LBW* 28). The melody we know comes from the chant Ambrose's congregations sang.

## 9 Second Sunday of Advent

We hear from John the Baptist today. The

desert prophet calls us to repentance, to conversion, to change—because the kingdom of heaven has come near. Today's texts are Isaiah 11:1–10; Romans 15:4–13; Matthew 3:1–12.

The hymn text “On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry” (*ELW* 249, *LBW* 36) was first printed in 1736. The tune goes back to at least the 15th century, and was adapted in about 1609 by Michael Praetorius (a Latinized version of his birth surname, Schultz). *ELW* includes four of his melodies.

## 16 Third Sunday of Advent

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that John the Baptist is a prophet, yes, and more than a prophet. The texts appointed for the day are Isaiah 35:1–10; James 5:7–10; Matthew 11:2–11.

When John was born, his father Zechariah was inspired to prophecy as well: See Luke 1:68–79. Zechariah's song, the *Benedictus*, has been sung at Morning Prayer since the sixth century. The hymn “Blessed be the God of Israel” (*ELW* 250) is a paraphrase, matched to an English folk melody in about 1906.

## 20 Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church

Bold, energetic, intelligent, competent: Katharina von Bora Luther (Katie) died on this date in 1552. The ELCA's Wittenberg Center offers a fine look at Frau Luther on the DVD, “The Morning Star of Wittenberg.” Find out more at [www.elca.org/MOSAIC/Luther/katie\\_luther.html](http://www.elca.org/MOSAIC/Luther/katie_luther.html).



## 23 Fourth Sunday of Advent

In today's Gospel, we hear Matthew's account of the annunciation and birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Today's texts are Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25.

The hymn "O come, O come, Emmanuel" (*ELW* 257, *LBW* 34) is based on seven antiphons from the ninth century, perhaps earlier. These antiphons were sung at Evening Prayer, one each day, from December 17 to 23. "O Emmanuel" belonged to the last day.

## 24 Nativity of Our Lord

### Christmas Eve

At the Christmas Eve service, we hear the beloved account from the Gospel of Luke. The angels' song has inspired many hymnwriters, ancient and modern. In 1739, Charles Wesley published "Hark! The herald angels sing" (*ELW* 270; *LBW* 60).

The melody we know was written by Felix Mendelssohn, not for a Christmas song, but as part of Leipzig's June 1840 celebration of the 400th anniversary of the printing press. This "Gutenberg Cantata" called for 200 men's voices, trumpets, trombones, and tympani. (The text for the third line of the carol we know—"Joyful, all you nations rise"—began "Gutenberg! der deutsche mann!") An English musician later set Wesley's text to Mendelssohn's tune and published the combina-

tion in 1857. Tonight's texts are Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; and Luke 2:1-14 [15-20].

## 25 Nativity of Our Lord

### Christmas Day

Why do we have three sets of readings for the Nativity of Our Lord? Because since the fourth century (or even earlier) there have been three Christmas worship services: midnight, dawn, and day. The texts suggested for Christmas Day are (set II) Isaiah 62:6-12; Titus 3:4-7; and Luke 2:[1-7] 8-20; and (set III) Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4 [5-12]; and John 1:1-14.

The psalm appointed for Christmas Day is Psalm 98. In 1719, Isaac Watts published *The Psalms of David*, hymns based on the psalms. His text for Psalm 98, part 2, begins "Joy to the world!" In 1836, the American musician Lowell Mason matched that text to the melody we know.

## 26 Stephen, deacon and martyr

Today's second reading tells the story of the first Christian martyr. The texts appointed for Stephen are 2 Chronicles 24:17-22; Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60; Matthew 23:34-39.

Do you know the song that starts "Good King Wenceslas went out, on the feast of Stephen"? The last line, "Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing" connects us to Deacon Stephen, who served the poor.

## 27 John, apostle and evangelist

The opening of the Gospel attributed to John is a mystical hymn to Christ the Word of God and Light of the world.

Echoing that mystical hymn is "Of the Father's love begotten" (*ELW* 295; *LBW* 42), which comes from a poem written in the late fourth century by Aurelius Prudentius, a retired officer of the imperial Roman court.

The texts for John's feast are Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 21:20-25.

## 28 The Holy Innocents, martyrs

"Once in royal David's city" alludes to the children Herod murdered (see today's Gospel) in the fourth verse. The hymnwriter, Cecil Frances Alexander, took her role as a bishop's wife seriously, serving the poor and sick tirelessly.

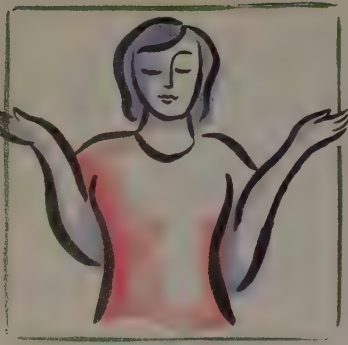
Today's texts are Jeremiah 31:15-17; 1 Peter 4:12-19; Matthew 2:13-18.

## 30 First Sunday of Christmas

"Let all together praise our God" (*ELW* 287; *LBW* 47) is suggested for this white Sunday. It was written in about 1554 by Nikolaus Herman, whose pastor was an old friend of Martin Luther's, and published in Wittenberg in 1561.

Today's appointed readings are Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23.





LET US PRAY

## A Prayer for Advent

by Debra K. Farrington

The gesture was a dramatic one. Young Francesco Bernardone, son of a wealthy family, began to sense that God was calling him to restore the church. So one day, he stole goods from his father's business, planning to sell them and give the money to help restore the church at St. Damian. Incensed, his father dragged the son before the local bishop for punishment. There Francesco accepted his father's disinheriting him, and stripped off the clothes he was wearing and gave them back.

With that gesture the man we now know as Francis of Assisi adopted life in the company of what he called Lady Poverty, an act of vulnerability but also of power. Francis meekly accepted the punishments of authority to which he no longer felt bound and boldly accepted a call from God.

Francis' act resonates with two other events that we focus on at this time of year: Mary's "yes" to God and the birth of the seemingly helpless baby Jesus, God's son. Mary's "yes" at the Annunciation looked like an act of meekness, but was actually a bold response—one that could have had disastrous personal ramifications—to a request that must have seemed outrageous. Jesus, born a baby, naked like any of us, and in the poorest conditions, was actually a king.

These two events, along with Francis's renunciation of wealth and family connections, remind us that power does not come from the sword. Real power comes, instead, from the One who gives us life. It is not ours to control, and accep-

tance of this fact looks like meekness or vulnerability to those who know power only as force. Francis, after renouncing his inheritance, traveled the countryside preaching about God's love. Many of those who had known him in his previous life considered him a fool. But Francis knew what they did not: Real power seeks to bring about peace—God's peace, rather than our own.

At a time when we pray fervently for peace on earth, perhaps the prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi makes a good Advent prayer. The prayer reminds us that we are God's instruments in bringing peace to the world. The power is not ours; it belongs to God. As you move through this blessed season of Advent, consider using this prayer each day.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

May your Advent season be blessed! 🌿

**Debra K. Farrington** has written eight books of Christian spirituality. Check out her Web site at [www.debrafarrington.com](http://www.debrafarrington.com).



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# Sharing the Yoke of Jesus

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” *Matthew 11:28-30*

by Catherine Malotky

None of the Gospel writers tell us about this specifically, but we’ve all seen the pictures. Mary, great with child, balancing on a donkey’s back, is led by Joseph toward Bethlehem. Only the Gospel of Luke tells us that they had to travel from Nazareth to register in Joseph’s home town. Given that Mary was so close to giving birth, it’s not hard to believe that the artists who later painted this subject probably came close to the real picture.

She and Joseph were yoked by this time. In spite of the scandal of a too-early pregnancy, the writer of Matthew’s Gospel tells us, Joseph took her as his wife. This was no small thing. They were clearly bucking the approval of their community, since it was not done this way. They were betrothed but by custom would not consummate their union until later. For her to show up pregnant was an affront to his rights to her virginity. Joseph had the right to leave her behind as spoiled goods.

In fact, Mary’s life could have been forfeited for this apparent slip, and the father of her child would have faced punishment too. If we look at the story from

the outside, we can see that Joseph should have left her to fend for herself. As the righteous man he was, he would have chosen to leave her quietly rather than make a public fuss.

## Joseph’s choice

However, according to Matthew, an angel cleared things up for Joseph, and encouraged him to take her as his wife and not be afraid. His betrothed had not been with another man. The angel explained that the child she carried had divine origins. She and this child were the fulfillment of prophecies that were woven tightly into their faith.

So, rather than severing their yoke, Joseph deepened it by taking Mary into his home, along with her child. He chose to use a different power—not the power that was his as a man in his culture, a power that treated women as mere property and his rights as paramount. Instead, Joseph chose to use a power that grew from his faith, and he took comfort in the angel’s words, in spite of the inevitable shaming he and Mary both would carry in their culture from then on. Joseph chose to take her as his wife,



tempering his rights for the sake of his faith and the vulnerable pregnant woman who would have nowhere to go if he dismissed her, even quietly. Joseph chose to yoke himself to Mary and that prophecy. She would not bear the stigma alone.

### Mary's choice

As for Mary, I suppose we could say she was lucky that Joseph would still have her. She was in the precarious position of property that had been only partly, not yet completely, transferred from her father to her soon-to-be husband. She was in transition, and if she was left unclaimed, if she fell through the cracks, she would have little recourse for herself and her child. Gleaning or prostitution would have been her most likely future, and from the story of Ruth, we get the idea that in either case her body would not be hers anymore. If dismissed, she would be alone and unprotected.

Yet, according to the writer of Luke, Mary was not alone but yoked—yoked to a promise. In spite of her vulnerability, she chose to trust the angel's message of hope. Like Hannah of old, she trusted that the child she carried would some day right long-standing wrongs, turning her world upside down by the mercy of God. Mary used her power, her strength, her faith, to choose a future much different from anything she could have imagined.

She chose to accept the task put before her, though it would cost her dearly. She chose to share the yoke of the promise.

### Yoked together

In Luke's version of the story, Mary and Joseph traveled together to be registered because they were betrothed. And so the artists' pictures have been painted over the centuries, trying to explore what it must have been like to carry the yokes—both to each other and to the promise. Having lived twice through ninth months of pregnancy, when joints and cartilage loosen in anticipation of the birth, when the baby's girth impedes breathing and eating, I am sure a donkey's back would not have been any woman's preferred method of transportation. Regardless of how they made the journey, for Mary, it would have been a trek to endure.

This young man and this young woman, yoked to each other and to the promise of the child, were also yoked to their culture and the occupying force that governed their land. They were chained. They had to go, even though the timing was not good, even though Mary was surely miserable, even though they faced yet another uncertain reception, especially if word had traveled ahead about their situation. Pregnant and merely betrothed? More shaming looks. More rejection and

misunderstanding. Maybe, even, no room at the inn.

The yoke they bore was certainly heavy, and it got no lighter once the baby was born. Matthew's story shows them fleeing to Egypt to escape King Herod's paranoia, having been warned by the Magi who had worshiped the child. And, of course, we know more of the story—Jesus' frequent wrangling with the religious authorities, and eventually his torture and shameful murder. The row to be turned under this yoke was not easy for Mary and Joseph. It cost them both dearly. But it also was infused with promise.

What difference does this make? A light at the end of the tunnel? A sure sense that the pain and effort would not be in vain but bear rich fruit some day? An ability to see the small wonders and joys in the midst of the burdens and challenges?

### Today's yoke

The fact that you are reading this tells me you are yoked by faith to Jesus. There are plenty of other magazines to fill your time. There are other distractions, other stories that promise good to you. Think about the cultural mythologies that turn our heads—that invite us to yoke up.

Do we not carry, deep in our bones, the idea that we are better if we do it ourselves? Self-sufficiency, the sanctity of the individual, is the



way ahead. Lean on few, if any, and your way will not be cluttered or slowed. So we work harder and longer, we volunteer less, love less, welcome less. We do not reveal our hearts to another, for fear they will *tsk* and doubt. We wall ourselves into a fortress of success and sure things.

Do we not carry, deep in our bones, the idea that security and happiness are the goal and that we can buy these things for ourselves and those we love? Marketers are happy to point out our vulnerabilities and make the case for the salve their product will be. We hear these messages day in and day out, and the distortions can lead us to believe that our beauty must be size 0 and age 22 or we have failed. We can come to believe that we must be rich to be secure, or that our houses must be bigger or our lawns greener or our cars faster or our food pure or our children extraordinary or our work life-changing. Our lives so easily become yoked to a dream that makes us do all the pulling.

Do we not carry, deep in our bones, the idea that we humans are the most important—that our economies and needs outweigh the needs of the creation, with its ecologies and careful web of dependencies? Have we not blundered through God's lovely garden, picking the blossoms willy-nilly, leaving behind a trail that is at best ugly and at worst will cost us or our heirs our lives?

These are the yokes of our day, and they weigh a ton. They ask us to pull, while digging in their heels. They demand pulling without the promise of fruition or rest. They do not promise a better world for our children, but seductively play on our fears for our own well-being in the here and now.

#### Jesus' yoke

In contrast, there is wisdom in Jesus' yoke. He bids us stop and adjust our sights. He sidles up next to us and leans into the yoke with all his strength. He stands with us, human and here.

We do not need to pull alone. Paradoxically, our vulnerability is our greatest asset. In community, those personal gaps can be filled by another. In community, we can see wider and deeper. In community, we can be whole even and especially when we differ.

We are not, ultimately, in danger of failing. Whatever we offer has been first given to us from our Creator. We are unique, called to serve from our strengths, to contribute what we have to give for the sake of the neighbor and the health of the community.

And we are not, finally, more important than any other part of the creation. We are a part of the web, not above it, and it is resilient and forgiving if we can find and honor all parts, including our own.

This is God's wisdom, God's yoking. So that we can know how beloved we are, God came to us, first a zygote, then an embryo, then a fetus, then a newborn, then a toddler, then a boy, then a man, and finally, a savior. In Jesus, we see God's will and way, that all struggles, all deaths, be they small or final, will be followed by new life.

It is for this we yoke ourselves and pull, day in and day out, on the good days and the ones we'd rather not face. We do not pull because we must, but because we can, because we are called by the One who loves us more than we can imagine. We pull because we can, because we have been gifted to serve. We pull because we can see, though Jesus, a new world of extraordinary beauty and grace, breaking through even now, with every pull a little more. And we pull because we know that when we cannot, our partner, Jesus, will not fail us but carry the load on our behalf until we have caught our breath and are ready to lean into the yoke again.

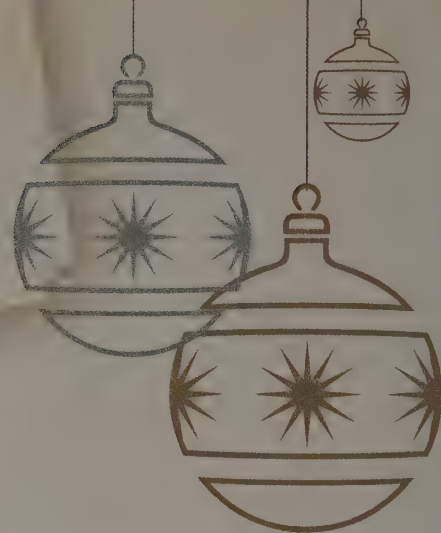
We can choose another kind of strength, tempered and sure, yoked to the One whose wisdom and welcome is unfailing. Come, Lord Jesus. Teach us that we might find rest in our souls. 🌿

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky** serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor and parish pastor.



# Bone-Deep Peace

by Angela Shannon



The words *Peace on Earth* bring back childhood memories of me sifting through Christmas cards and finding a special one with gold letters emblazoned over a nativity scene. It was the most beautiful card I had ever seen. I understood that the nativity was about “baby Jesus,” but those sparkling words might as well have been ancient symbols.

Curious, I traced the outline of the letters with my fingers. I took the card to my mother and asked her to read it to me. She did and explained that “baby Jesus” brings peace to the whole world. That was a fine enough explanation for a four-year-old. I imagine that my mother probably sighed, relieved that she had escaped the endless “why?” questions. Contented, I went back to my pile of Christmas cards on the living room floor.

*Peace on Earth.* I wonder how often we choose the simplest definition of peace and then return to the pace of our daily lives, or as in the case of my little-girl self, our

pretty Christmas cards. What does it mean?

I think we would all agree that peace is one of those “right desires.” But all we have to do is look around to see all kinds of events and circumstances that challenge the claim that Jesus brought peace to the whole world. In my lifetime, there have been no less than 100 revolts, invasions, wars, civil conflicts, terrorist attacks, and genocidal campaigns around the globe. And I’m not that old!

It seems we are skilled at waging war and inflicting great harm in this world. And let’s look closer to home, too. What about the 1,001 petty things we do to each other daily—our bad-mannered and mean-spirited acts? When we feel threatened, slighted, devalued, or disrespected, we react with a range of emotions—from irritation to all-out war. It makes me want to scream the Rodney King question on a daily basis: “Can’t we all just get along?”

We need to consciously and passionately seek out peace. And I’m preaching to myself.

I used to think that peace meant the absence of conflict, a truce. Then I evolved (or devolved, depending on how you look at it) into thinking that peace was a restraining device that kept people from doing nasty things to each other.

But it’s more than a straitjacket or a vise. When I don’t fight or strike back, yes, that is a fruit of peace, but Isaiah knew that real peace is more internal; it comes from God who dwells within us. It is a bone-deep knowledge that Christ is pure love. Jesus had no hidden agendas, no desire to win or be right, no thirst for blood. Jesus was never insincere or two-faced. God’s son is love, consistent and true, through and through.

Humility and love

Jesus invited us to “take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and



you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). He offered this gracious invitation after telling us that God had given him all things. Most of us would have taken advantage of that kind of influence.

In the movie, "Bruce Almighty," God takes a vacation and gives Bruce divine authority and powers. Bruce uses his newfound powers not for world peace, but for his personal gain. He becomes obsessed with power. It possesses him, and so he makes a mess of things. We are not that different from Bruce.

Jesus had power and authority. But it was tempered with humility and love, which can be expressed in meekness. By worldly standards, meekness is rarely celebrated. In any thesaurus you will find a list of synonyms that include weak, apprehensive, deferential, passive, and self-effacing. But Christ-like humility and meekness have to do with knowing God's love and believing God's operating instructions about you. God says that each of us is loved and valued. We are to model that and share it with others.

Several years ago, I saw snippets of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's proceedings that Archbishop Desmond Tutu led. The proceedings were set up by the South African government in an effort to heal the country's fractured society of the atrocities committed under apartheid. The government

invited Black and White people of all classes to participate without fear of reprisal or imprisonment. I remember one instance when Archbishop Tutu was pleading with a woman to acknowledge her participation in a heinous act. The woman met Tutu's appeals with an icy gaze and contemptuous disdain. Apparently, she saw Tutu as weak. Tutu responded by exercising meekness in the biblical sense. At that point, it did not matter to me that the peacemaker was a Nobel Peace Prize recipient or that he was the world-renowned Archbishop Tutu. I saw a humble disciple of Christ trying to encourage peace by starting with reconciliation.

His appeal did not influence the person it was meant to, but it did have an effect on me, half a world away. Tutu was a living example of meekness at work.

Wide awake

Peace is given to us through discipleship, which begins with baptism. We are loved and claimed in this earthly life and throughout eternity. It is unnecessary to prove our value to receive this love. Our community of faith helps us to live into the reality that we are loved and claimed by God. We are then supposed to go out and proclaim this reality in the world. I fully believe we can do it, because what God calls us to do, God so equips us.

Our task may not be as big as heading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but we are called to share *shalom*—peace and wholeness—in the world. One of my mentors is fond of saying, "If you want to clean up the city, begin by sweeping your front porch."

We can begin by practicing biblical meekness with our families, friends, and colleagues. We can commit to using the "soft answer, which turns away wrath." And we can do it without losing face, because as St. Paul reminds us, "Christ is our life" (Colossians 3:3–4).

There will be times when we blow it. Just confess it, receive God's forgiveness, and recommit to the practice of peace.

My mother was right in telling me that baby Jesus would bring peace to the world, but it does not end there. Advent is about being wide awake. We can't fall asleep at the manger with the lowing cattle. We must remain awake and watchful. Christ teaches us the way of peace, if we listen and follow him as his disciples.

In Isaiah 2:1–5, people from all over ascend the Lord's mountain to learn of God's ways and walk in God's paths. When we descend that holy mountain, we are equipped to teach God's ways to others. 🌿

**The Rev. Angela Shannon** is associate pastor for mission, outreach, and evangelism at Trinity English Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind.





HEALTH WISE

## December Years

by Molly M. Ginty

### Jeanne Calment, age

122, said it was chocolate and red wine.

Yone Minagawa, 114, cited the companionship of friends and family.

Edna Parker, also 114, said it was exercise from working the family farm.

All three of these women cited different reasons for reaching their advanced age. Calment, who lived in Arles, France, and died in 1997, holds the world record for longevity. Minagawa, of Fukuoka, Japan, just died in August this year, which makes Parker, of Shelbyville, Indiana, the oldest U.S. citizen living today.

Scientists say it's no surprise that all three of these centenarians (people over age 100) are women. Of the 40,000 centenarians in the United States today, 85 percent are women—possibly because women have better health habits than men, and possibly because the female hormone estrogen promotes longevity.

Due to advances in medicine, life expectancy in the United States has jumped from 71 to 78 years since 1970. Women now live to an average age of 80, while men live to 75. Centenarians are the fastest-growing age group, and their numbers may continue to increase as baby boomers age—if boomers have the right mix of good genes, healthy diet, and regular exercise.

Why do some people not only live longer, but in better health? Much of it comes down to DNA. “Choosing your parents wisely makes all the difference,” says Stephen Coles, Ph.D. and M.D., co-founder of the Los-Angeles based Gerontology Research Group.

Having an extra copy of the SIR2 gene, which affects your ability to withstand physical deprivation, can help you live longer. So can inheriting Apo-A1 Milano, a mutation found among Italian villagers that can keep your blood cholesterol levels and risk of heart disease low no matter how much fatty food you eat.

Even so, genes only account for an estimated 30 percent of longevity. Scientists say you can add an extra 10 years to your life simply by exercising regularly and eating well.

Studies show that getting the 30 minutes of physical activity authorities recommend each day may increase your lifespan. Consider the people of the Japanese island of Okinawa, who have average life expectancies of 86 for women and 78 for men. Here, seniors in their 80s, 90s, and 100s walk, jog, swim, harvest their own vegetables, and even catch their own fish.

Just as these centenarians' workouts may help account for their longevity, so too may their food choices. Older Okinawans eat a traditional low-fat, high-protein, high-fiber diet. Consuming resveratrol (found in green tea and red wine) can activate the SIR2 gene. Other antioxidants (found in fruits, vegetables, and yes, chocolate) can help prevent cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, and other ailments associated with aging.

Like Okinawa's great (and great-great) grandparents, many people with long lifespans hail from remote areas where food is scarce. That's why some believe that the secret to longevity is a

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This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) for more information.



calorie-restricted diet, in which you eat carefully balanced, nutritious meals but consume 60 to 80 percent of normal intake (for example, 1,200 to 1,600 calories daily instead of the 2,000 recommended for the average American).

“Calorie restriction enables lab animals to live 30 to 40 percent longer,” says Lenny Guarente, Ph.D., a biology professor at Boston’s Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “It wards off cancer, cardiovascular disease, neurodegenerative problems, and diabetes. But people who try it often develop anemia and feel cold. They lose bone and muscle mass, and are emotionally irritable.”

Before you start starving yourself, note that irritability can actually shorten your lifespan. Studies show that being social can help fend off heart disease and depression, and that seniors who are married or live near loved ones tend to live longer. The Okinawans’ longevity may stem in part from their practice of forming a *moai*—a close-knit circle of friends who provide emotional and social support throughout life.

Just as the Okinawans believe in *ikigai* (having a personal purpose for living), most centenarians have developed successful emotional coping mechanisms. Overall, they tend to handle stress well, to be optimistic, and to revel in humor.

“Centenarians don’t hold grudges,” says Maoshing Ni, the Santa Monica-based author of *Secrets of Longevity*. “They realize life is a long journey, and that carrying baggage around is going to weigh you down.”

To find out how genes, diet, exercise, and attitude affect longevity, the Bethesda-based National Institute on Aging has kicked off the Long Life Family Study, and the Boston University School of Medicine has launched the New England Centenarian Study.

But these studies’ final results won’t be ready for years, and it could take a decade or more to develop drugs that

*Studies show that getting the 30 minutes of physical activity authorities recommend each day may increase your lifespan.*

mimic the SIR2 gene’s effects. In the meantime, what’s an aging person to do?

You may not be as disciplined as the Seventh-day Adventists, a religious group that shuns cigarettes, alcohol, meat, and caffeine. They tend to live 10 years longer than average.

You may not live to be 110-plus, as people reportedly do in Shangri-Las such as Dongzi, Tibet, the Hunza Valley in Pakistan, and the Vilcabamba Valley in Ecuador. But with the genes God gave you—and by following the health tips above—you can certainly make the most of your own December years. 🌸

**Molly M. Ginty** lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women’s eNews*.



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# MERCY BOLD

when words collide

*by Elyse Nelson Winger*





Advent is here, but the coffeehouses are celebrating Christmas. It's three o'clock in the afternoon and caffeine is calling. I head to one of my regular haunts, order a cup of the day, and the barista behind the counter asks: Bold or mild? My answer is swift: Bold! I love bold coffee. And I love bold Christianity. To me, bold faith is about compassion and courage, peace and proclamation, exuberance and empowerment! I want to drink bold coffee and preach bold sermons and pray bold prayers. I want to be a part of bold communities that proclaim God's grace and mercy for the whole world. I want to contribute to bold conversation about the history and message of our Scripture. I want to share in Women of the ELCA's mission to mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. So when the barista asks me, "Bold or mild?" there's not even a contest. I hear *mild* and wonder, why not just drink decaf?

And in this season of Advent, when I hear mild, I also hear meek. References to "Mary, meek and mild" abound in prayer and devotional poetry. Charles Wesley penned the children's hymn "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild." Mild, gentle, meek Madonna and Child paintings cover postage stamps and Christmas cards. Even the Mary in my children's nativity set exudes this meek and mild attitude, with downcast eyes and humble pose. So, I have to be honest. Mild coffee doesn't jolt my tastebuds, and a meek and mild Savior and his mother don't inspire.

But really, what is meek and mild about Mary's prophetic praise of God in

the Magnificat? What is meek and mild about Jesus' teaching, healing, dying, and rising again? Nothing! Mary and Jesus are bold to the core! And yet, Jesus did not say: Blessed are the bold. He proclaimed: Blessed are the meek. So, what does Scripture really say about meekness? And what is its relationship to boldness?

### A glaring contrast

The Book of Sirach encourages us as follows: "My child, perform your tasks with meekness; then you will be loved by those whom God accepts" (3:17). The letter to the Colossians exhorts us to clothe ourselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (3:12). And Paul begins his second apology in his second letter to the Corinthians like this: "I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting by human standards" (2 Corinthians 10:1–2).

Well. It didn't take long for meekness and boldness to collide. Could the contrast between the exercise of boldness and the virtue of meekness be more glaring? (Clearly, Paul would've chosen bold coffee in Ephesus, but taken a mild cup in Corinth.) For Paul, acting boldly is a necessary evil, reserved for situations of conflict and correction. Boldness is used to "destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:4b–5).



Meekness, on the other hand, is used as an appeal to reconciliation, compassion, and humility; it could easily take its place between “gentleness” and “self-control” in Paul’s list of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians. So, have we had it all wrong? Should Women of the ELCA do a massive edit of its statement and proclaim that its mission “is to mobilize women to act *meekly* on their faith in Jesus Christ?” How can boldness be lifted up when the fruits of the Spirit so strongly lead to meekness?

Fortunately, there’s a richness and depth to the meaning of meekness that embraces the virtues of gentleness, humility, and patience and that requires boldness! And it begins with Jesus’ teaching: “Blessed are the meek.” Note that he didn’t say, “Blessed is meekness!” And so it seems to me that we must really get to the heart of what Jesus meant by the *meek* and then let reality guide our practice of meekness.

#### Called out with promise

Advent is a wonderful time to ponder this relationship, for one of our readings for the second Sunday of Advent is Isaiah 11:1–10. The Christian understanding of Jesus’ identity, mission, and message has been profoundly shaped by the prophecies of Isaiah, and here the identity of the meek is clearly revealed: “A shoot shall come out from the stock

of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (11:1–4a).

Later in Isaiah, God’s promises are proclaimed yet again: “The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel” (29:19). Isaiah is not speaking of a spiritual state of poverty, meekness, or neediness. He is addressing the real-life situations of inequality. And he is promising a new day of hope and restoration for those who have been slighted by society’s injustice and greed.

Jesus is the new bearer and fulfillment of this promise. He proclaims: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Moses—left in the bulrushes because of society’s injustice, raised among oppressors, never quite fitting in, and belonging to a people who would always be foreign in their own way—was indeed meek. Jesus—born into a peasant family, creating community with fishermen, women, and outcasts, preaching the kingdom of

God, and being unjustly executed as a common criminal—was indeed meek. Jesus was one of them. And he blessed them, calling them out with a promise that they would inherit the earth. He emboldened them to claim this blessing now, to speak with fresh joy about the love and mercy of God.

When we look at Jesus’ teaching in this way, boldness and meekness are actually inseparable. Blessing implies calling, which requires passion, which necessitates boldness. The followers of Jesus who preached the gospel in Acts of the Apostles were the meek, and yet they spoke boldly. Acts 4:13 records the response of the Jerusalem crowd: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.”

The meek were blessed friends of Jesus who were emboldened by blessing to heal the sick and preach the gospel. And the meek are truly all of us who recognize how powerless we ultimately are without the love and mercy of God. A genuine practice of meekness, humility, and compassion *requires* boldness for its sustenance and sharing. Looking for the meek and for signs of their boldness in the midst of injustice is our Advent calling. Jesus’ blessing of the meek calls on each us to recognize and bring blessing.

## Woe was me

Advent was approaching, my pregnancy was coming closer to full term, and my pastoral internship at St. Andrew's Church in Cairo, Egypt, was underway. Today my supervisor, David, and I would visit the Christian churches atop the Moqattam Hills.

We drove through the gates of the walled church complex in downtown Cairo and into the chaos of the Cairo streets. We traversed a maze of highways and bridges, our sturdy French station wagon mingling with overflowing minibuses, darting between cars, avoiding trucks coughing up crud, passing bicycles ridden by young men topped with pallets of bread, and dodging donkey carts driven by the *zebeleen*, or garbage collectors, of the city.

After more than a year in Cairo, I was used to this kind of traffic. It was not enjoyable, but it was always a spectacle of life, in all its glory and gloom. Today I took special notice of the donkey carts, for they all eventually made their way to the outskirts of town, where we were headed as well. Little did I know how much gloom awaited.

We left the main highway. The streets, now unpaved dirt and mud, twisted up the hill. And as we ascended, the trash appeared. At first, what looked like a littered street after a weekend fair became

a perilous track through nothing but garbage, piled tall and pouring out of doorways. My stomach was tightening and my horror growing. We kept moving, and then I saw it: the mountain of garbage. And dotting this landscape of waste were apartment buildings, filled with families whose laundry hung from open windows.

Sprinkled all over this hillside of trash were goats and pigs and dogs—and children. The horror of the sight now overwhelmed me as I clutched my belly. I can't do this. Please turn around. I couldn't make it to the hilltop churches to visit an ancient Christian community whose livelihood was collecting and sorting and recycling the trash of the city. Woe was me, for I had had my fill.

For months, the injustice of grinding poverty had been increasingly revealed to me as I lived as a privileged foreigner in Egypt. Today, the revelation was complete, and I was wrecked. I thought of our own garbage collector, Ibrahim, who had proudly showed me the Coptic Christian cross tattooed on the inside of his wrist upon our first meeting. I thought of his children and grandchildren, growing up here in a dump for a city of 16 million people, and I wondered: How do they make sense of their lives as God's children and baptized followers of Jesus?

## A different story

I didn't make it to the top of the Moqattam Hills that day, but I did visit the neighborhood below them again, this time to see a program for women and girls, funded in part by local Christian organizations. And there I witnessed a bold response to Jesus' blessing of the meek. White-washed walls and climbing flowers marked this spot as a place of hope. From the courtyard, the hill of trash was still visible, but the cleanliness and brightness of the buildings told a different story.

In this program women and girls were learning basic literacy and business skills. The women were taking rags, clothing, and cloth from the hillside, washing them, cutting them, dyeing them, and making rugs, bags, and purses. And they were selling them all over the city, through micro-credit programs, at holiday bazaars, and at small shops for tourists hoping to make purchases that would benefit the local community.

Someone had been bold enough to bless the meek and to empower them to share in the inheritance of the kingdom. Someone had heard: Blessed are the meek. And with humility, meekness, and boldness, they were working for the sake of the kingdom of God. 🌸

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## BIBLE STUDY

BLESSED TO FOLLOW: THE BEATITUDES  
AS A COMPASS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

### SESSION 4

# Following with Tempered Strength

by Martha E. Stortz

## Theme Verse

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."  
(Matthew 5:5)

## Opening

**Hymn** "How Great Thou Art," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 856 or *Lutheran Book of Worship* 532; or "Let the Whole Creation Cry," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 876 or *Lutheran Book of Worship* 242

## Prayer

Gracious God, you made the heaven,  
the earth, the seas, and all that is in them.  
You called us to have dominion over the earth;  
yet we exercise that dominion  
with domination and violence.  
Teach us meekness,  
so that we will be worthy inheritors of your promise.  
We ask this in the name of Jesus,  
meekness made flesh.  
Amen.

## Introduction

The popular misconception that *meek* means *weak* inspired a group that calls itself DOORMATS: "Dependent Organization of Really Meek and Timid Souls." Its motto: "The meek shall inherit the earth—if there are no objections."

Divine logic begs to differ. In the biblical world, the meek are powerful people who temper their strength. The Hebrew Scriptures present Moses as meekness personified: "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3, KJV). Moses had lots of objections: He objected to God's choosing him to lead the Israelites; he objected when the chosen people chose to worship other gods; and he boldly objected when God threatened to destroy the chosen people for worshipping other gods. Moses was no doormat.

See a video clip of author Martha E. Stortz introducing Session 4 of this Bible study at [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org).

The Bible study has a blog! Check out [www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com](http://www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com).

Neither was Moses' New Testament counterpart, Jesus. He entered Jerusalem, "meek and sitting upon an ass" (Matthew 21:5, KJV)—not the triumphal entry one would expect for the ruler of the Kingdom of God. Yet even demons ran from Jesus in terror. He objected to money-changers in his Father's house—and drove them out with a fury that was not at all meek. He objected to social limits, as the repeated slur suggests: Jesus was "a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (see Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:34). Jesus even protested his fate, but then submitted, a gesture of humility that required more strength than the initial objection.

These two biblical portraits take the "wimp factor" out of meekness. Biblical meekness is tempered strength, power held in check. On the whole, Moses managed this, though an outstanding exception cost him entry into the Promised Land. Jesus was meekness incarnate. His promise in this Beatitude restores to Moses the land he never got to inhabit.

In this session, we explore this disposition of discipleship by entering more deeply into the lives of two of its most dedicated practitioners, Moses and Jesus.

## Tempered Strength

Watching Uncle Irving get mad was like watching a volcano erupt in miniature. Red spread up his neck and onto his face, and hot words poured from his mouth. To a child of eight, the effect was impressive. Once I asked my father about his brother: "Well," he said with a smile, "Irving's always had a short fuse." My father, in contrast, had a long fuse. He was even and steady, with a center of gravity that grounded us all.

Meekness marked the difference between the two men, one short-tempered and the other long-tempered. That difference points toward the gap between power held in check and power run amok. My uncle's explosions show that the real opposite of meekness is unchecked impulse. He would simply blow up.

But the meek person is more protected from squalls of rage, circumstance, or misfortune. She weathers storms because she has a deep anchor.

My father was frequently caught in the storms of his brother's anger. He must have been tempted to storm right back at him; instead, he put up with it, refusing to retaliate in kind. His deep anchor and even keel kept the conflict from escalating.

If we project this domestic drama onto an international scale, we see the desperate need for tempered power, biblical meekness. That kind of meekness moves beyond winners and losers to rest in a divine order. Biblical meekness has an infinite fuse, stretching to eternity and anchored firmly in the heart of God. Not only is God long-tempered, God became one of us to share our suffering and show us the pathways of peace. (See article on page 18.) Through Jesus, we know the meekness of a God who suffers with us, enveloping us in a Father's love.

1. ***Are there certain issues that make you "see red"? Do you know when to stand up and when to stand back? How do you decide?***
2. ***What happens when communities, congregations, or nations "see red"? Do you find any examples of biblical meekness in the world today? How about its opposite?***

## The Story of Moses

Moses was "meek above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3).

His story can be pieced together from the books of his biography:

- Birth and upbringing (Exodus 2:1–10)
- Murder of an Egyptian (Exodus 2:11–15)
- Commissioning (Exodus 3:1–20)
- Meribah incident (Exodus 17:1–7; Numbers 20:2–13)
- Epiphany (Exodus 33:17–34:9)



- Complaints (Numbers 12:1–2; Exodus 32:1–4)
- Final blessing (Deuteronomy 33:1–29)

The meekest man on earth needs no less than four books of the Bible for his story. The Moses story begins in the bulrushes at the beginning of the book of Exodus and ends with his burial at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, not in the Promised Land, but in view of it. Moses was not afraid to stand up to God, nor to his fellow Israelites. He ably represented God to the people and the people to God, challenging both when he thought they might be wrong.

### **Moses the Mighty**

We know from the start that Moses was no wimp: His adult life began with a murder, as he saw an Egyptian beating one of his tribesmen. Moses responded with untempered power: He killed the Egyptian and went on the lam (Exodus 2:11–15). He was capable of rage.

Moses objected mightily when God called to him from a burning bush to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Before we read his protest as mere whining, it's worth remembering that he was looking into an inferno. Still, he objected four times:

- He questioned his own credentials;
- He questioned God's;
- He presented his own inelegant speech;
- He offered his brother instead.

God remained undaunted. Like a good representative, Moses stood up for God before the people; he stood up for the people before God.

- 3. Have you ever tempered your own power? Are you glad you did? What happened?**
- 4. Have you ever been in the middle, mediating between two parties? Did meekness help? How?**
- 5. Have you ever protested God's direction? What happened?**

We see Moses' temper flare spectacularly during his leadership. The incident at Meribah, when the thirsty people wanted water, cost him entry into the Promised Land (Exodus 17:1–7; Numbers 20:9–13). Moses' anger flared again when he discovered that the Israelites had built a golden calf to worship during his absence on the mountain with God. He destroyed the idol with the two tablets of the covenant that God had given him on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:19–20). Finally, Moses repeatedly got angry with God. He registered shock that God would allow his chosen people to suffer at the hands of the Egyptians (5:22). He met God's wrath against the faithless people with a wrath of his own: "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?" (32:11) Moses does not protect anyone from his anger, not even the living God.

### **Moses the Meek**

Yet there's ample biblical evidence of a mild Moses. He held his power in check when needed. He endured the disdain of Pharaoh. He suffered the spinelessness and spitefulness of Aaron and Miriam (Numbers 12:1–2; Exodus 32:1–4). He put up with the people's murmuring. He even endured God's wrath (Numbers 20:12; Deuteronomy 32:50–52). Moses humbly accepted God's judgment that he would never cross into the Promised Land. The children of the faithless people would inherit the land—but not the man who had faithfully led them.

### **Biblical Meekness: Bold or Just Unfair?**

What's going on here? Biblical meekness seems to be volatile, bold at best, and at its worst, grossly unfair. How did Moses know when to *stand up* and when to *stand back*? The golden calf incident unlocks it. A lesser leader would have simply thrown up his hands in despair over the backsliding people and marched

off into the desert where he could at least die in peace. Yet Moses never walked away from either his God or his people. Pleading before the people for God's will, pleading before God for the people's lives, he stayed with God's program. He shows us that tenacity is at the heart of biblical meekness.

You've got to admire a leader like that—and God clearly did. The flare-up over the golden calf only bound together God and Moses more deeply. Only after that incident did Moses receive a visit from God. God spoke with him “face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11), and God granted him a revelation of divine goodness, passing by him in full divine glory. What did Moses see?

“The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love  
and faithfulness” (34:6).

Moses saw into the heart of God. He found there an infinitely long temper and awesome power held in check for the sake of a beloved people. God is meekness itself.

Moses died in view of a land he would not inherit, yet his last words were blessings. As he breathed his last, Moses rained blessings down upon his troubled people. They streamed down like manna in a desert (Deuteronomy 33:1–29).

- 6. What parts of Moses' story highlight Moses the Meek? Moses the Mighty?**
- 7. What was it like to have the kind of friendship with God that Moses had?**
- 8. Talk about Moses' relationship to his people. He seems to have loved them, but not liked them at times. What is it like to be bound to people you love, but often don't like? What is it like to lead them?**

## The Story of Jesus

You can piece together the story of Jesus from the books of his biography:

- Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36)
- Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:4–5)
- I AM sayings (John 6:35, 8:12, 10:11, 15:1)
- Commissioning of Jesus (Matthew 26:39)
- Jesus' final blessing (Luke 23:34)
- Death of Jesus (Matthew 27:50; Luke 23:46; John 19:30)
- Resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–11; John 20:1–10)

Jesus perfected Moses' meekness. Jesus cast out demons, healed lepers, restored sight to the blind, and spoke “with authority” (Mark 1:27). He walked on water, calmed stormy seas, and fed the hungry. Like Moses, he objected to divine intent: “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” Yet his very next words check the power of that protest: “Yet not what I want but what you want” (Matthew 26:39).

We think we know the story of Jesus by heart, yet reading it next to the story of Moses offers a new perspective. Certainly there are surface similarities between each man's might and meekness, but there are deeper links.

Moses met a God who identified himself only as “I AM.” In John's Gospel, Jesus begins each discourse with those words from the burning bush, but he finishes the sentence: “I AM the bread of life” (John 6:35); “I AM the true vine” (15:1); “I AM the light of the world” (8:12); “I AM the good shepherd” (10:11). Suddenly a God shrouded in mystery is revealed in images of bread and vine, shepherds and lamps. Jesus reveals the meekness of God: power held in check so that believers might eat and drink, see and be safe.



9. *How did Jesus temper his strength with the people around him: the disciples, the Pharisees and scribes, the Romans?*
10. *Like Moses, Jesus often seemed to travel with people he deeply loved but at times didn't like. What was that like?*
11. *Finally, Jesus and Moses meet at the Transfiguration. What advice do you think Moses gave Jesus?*

## Meeting God Face to Face

Then there are the times when, like Moses, Jesus speaks with God face to face. One is the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). Should we be surprised that the Gospels record the presence of Moses? He has seen God passing by, and now he emerges to support God's own Son. Jesus encounters God again in Gethsemane, and this time the conversation is not so easy. Like Moses, Jesus protests: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me." Then he surrenders: "yet not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36).

Just as the demons in the Gospels know who Jesus is before his disciples do, so the Roman soldiers recognize divine meekness: "He saved others; he cannot save himself" (Matthew 27:42). Beneath their mockery is fear. The soldiers know that it is the meek—not the occupying army—that will inherit the earth.

Perhaps the soldiers glimpse for an instant where their unending war will lead them. Perhaps the meek inherit the earth because they are the only ones left standing! But there is a deeper message here. No one can measure up to divine meekness: There is too much war in our world and, just as bad, war in our souls. If Moses, icon of meekness, couldn't make it into the Promised Land, what hope is there for us?

The good news is that we don't need to measure up to Moses. Jesus too died with a blessing on his lips: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they

are doing" (Luke 23:34). Jesus shows himself to be greater than Moses. He does not turn his back on anyone, even his persecutors. We are all forgiven. Like Moses' benediction, Jesus' blessing falls like manna from heaven.

## The Advice They Give

Imagine yourself in prayer with Jesus and Moses, much as Jesus was in prayer with Moses and Elijah at this Transfiguration. What advice would Jesus and Moses give to you?

12. *Can you offer an instance when anger served a good purpose? What about anger at injustice? Do you have an example of an expression of anger that strengthened a relationship?*

## Disciples: An Invitation to Inherit the Earth

The One who incarnates meekness issues an invitation to all disciples: "Come to me, all you who labor and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29).

We rush to take up his yoke for three reasons:

**First**, we know that he speaks the truth about his own meekness. We know the strength that is its foundation. Both Jesus and Moses knew wrath, particularly in the face of injustice.

**Second**, often we are mercilessly hard on ourselves. Think about all the burdens you place on yourself. What do you think Jesus is asking you to do? Often his task for us is easier than the ones we place upon ourselves. When he invites each of us to take up his yoke, he promises to bear it with us. All we have to do is say yes! (See article on page 14.)

**Third**, Jesus promises what we most need in a world of burdens: rest. Moses did not even get to rest

in the Promised Land. God's judgment seems unfair, until we read it in the light of this Beatitude: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

### Practice: Meekness in Speech

This is a time in both the church and in the world when words can be weapons. We could use a little more verbal meekness. Moses and Jesus give disciples some rules for holy conversation.

- **Start a difficult conversation** with a prayer pause. After the golden calf incident, Moses lingered with God, letting his wrath cool. Even Jesus escaped the needy crowds to go up into the mountains to pray. Conversations that begin with prayer—whether spoken or not—go better. (See article on page 32.)
- **Try taking the other side;** see things from the other point of view. Moses was good at representing God's side to the people and the people's side to God. As we gain experience with this particular skill of holy conversation, we ready ourselves to obey Jesus' impossible command to love our enemy and pray for our persecutors (Matthew 5:44).
- **Cultivate tenacity.** Meekness commits to the long haul, a commitment that can be expressed creatively and clearly. You may need to specify how much time you have for conversation. In congregational settings where volatile issues are scheduled for discussion, set a time frame—and stick to it. The last question should always be: Do we need to come back to this? The secret to holy conversation is assuring people that whatever happens, you'll be there for each other. Remember Moses' tenacity with God; remember Jesus' tenacity with his clueless disciples.
- **Know who you are.** The "I AM" statements in John's Gospel recall Moses and the burning bush. God tells Moses who God is; Moses knows who Moses is, too. Moses knows where his blind spots are, and where his people's are as well. He antici-

pates where he'll need help; he asks for it. Know who you are, know where you need help, and ask for it. That's meekness in action.

- **Use anger to build up, not to destroy.** Fearing anger's destructive potential, many people hold in their discontent. But anger held in eats them away on the inside—or it erupts.

Biblical meekness does not hold back anger, particularly in the face of injustice. Perhaps the world's leaders fear that the meek will inherit the earth, which is why they cling all the more violently to control. Jesus' promise is true. The meek *will* inherit the earth.

### Closing

**Hymn** "The King Shall Come," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 260 or *Lutheran Book of Worship* 33; or "Savior of the Nations, Come," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 263 or *Lutheran Book of Worship* 28

### Prayer

Holy Jesus, you are meekness made flesh.  
Help us find in you a way to be firm and loving,  
strong and holy, gracious and filled with delight.  
Through your example,  
may we prove worthy inheritors of the earth  
and loving stewards of your creation.  
We pray in your Spirit, which broods over us all.  
Amen.

### Looking ahead

**"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."** The fourth Beatitude embraces those who long for justice. In the next session, we explore longing as God's way of directing us toward holy protest and service. 🌿  
**Martha E. Stortz** is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif., and the author of *A World according to God* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).





# Holy Conversation

by Peter W. Marty

Humpback whales sing to communicate. Birds chirp with their friends when they discover a birdfeeder. Honeybees dance to tell their hive mates about the latest cache of pollen found. But human beings use words when it comes to conversing with one another. Words are how we get along in life. The way we put them together is how we make a new world every day for one another. Money may enable us to exist, but it is words that are more valuable than money. Words allow us to live and flourish. They are inextricably involved with life.

Child-development researchers know that infants need people talking to them from the moment they are born. Without this conversation lavished on them, babies do not grow and develop as normal human beings with full social potential. This is why neonatal nurses can be found whispering frequently to even the tiniest of the tiny. These caregivers know that there is more than holding and touching involved, if one is to nurture another human being into a robust life.

#### Dangerous speech

Words do more than nurture; they also can deceive. They are slippery and capable of distorting an otherwise beautiful relationship. Sometimes we use good and sturdy words to conceal or mislead. In the Garden of Eden everything was fine

until the serpent began raising the prospect that maybe some words are not all they appear to be. "Did God really say you will die if you eat from any tree in the garden?" "No," the serpent continued, "you certainly will not die." Ever since that troubling moment, it seems that we have struggled to trust what rests behind the words that other people speak to us.

If a person says to you, "I give you my word," what they are really saying is that they can be trusted. But we know that politicians can disappoint as easily as home-improvement contractors who do shoddy work after a great sales pitch. We know that relatives can break our trust in them as readily as friends can break our hearts.

Some days it seems like words of honor are broken so casually that they never meant anything in the first place. This is why so many people have trouble trusting God when God says, "I give you my Word." God repeats this idea over and over again, finally wrapping it up in flesh and blood and setting it gently down in a manger. Yet the world still treats this Word as shaky or suspicious.

All of us are guilty of misusing our mouths and uttering words that perform like poisonous darts. We live as descendants of Isaiah, who said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; I am a man of unclean lips and I

dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). We victimize other people through words that are not spoken carefully or thoughtfully. Others hurt us by slinging words our way that reek of disregard. But there is a better way to co-exist. It comes when we realize how holy our everyday conversation can be.

#### Words truly matter

If we ever doubt that simple words carry great weight, all we have to do is remember a time when someone said, "I love you." Or "I can't stand you." The difference is huge. Defendants live or die when a judge says, "Guilty" or "Not guilty." Just think of the power and possibility contained in words spoken from one human being to another. No one ever forgets those eight words that open up a new world for us, if we are lucky enough to hear them even once in life: "We would like to offer you a position."

Words spoken to others are the currency of life. They are how we give shape to our aspirations, and how we give flight to the dreams of others. In a very real sense, our words contain what matter most to us. They reveal our deepest passions and preferences. More often than not, they prove to be more important to our relationships than the ways we touch, hold, or even look upon another.



Apostle Paul knew how important truthful words are for sustaining a relationship. When he was jailed and struggling to preserve a buoyant spirit in his fledgling congregations, "Words were all he had to fight back with," writes Barbara Brown Taylor. "Words were the only strength he had left, so he made piles and piles of them, rolling them up and pressing them through the bars of his cell like pieces of his own heart. On the one hand it was absurd . . . What were words? Black marks on sheets of paper? Letters strung together across a page?" Brown Taylor goes on: "On the other hand [these words] were truth, and Paul knew it." If people were going to take Jesus Christ seriously, Paul believed he was going to have to find words that they could take seriously. This was his project. It is also his legacy that aids us in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

#### Precious words

Not all words carry the same value. The Lord's Prayer is 66 words long. The Gettysburg Address is 286 words. There are 1,322 words in the Declaration of Independence. Yet government regulations on the sale of cabbage contain 26,911 words. Why the disparity? Well, there are different kinds of words we use for different situations. Whether or not we need 26,911 to regulate the sale of cabbage is anyone's

guess. Those would certainly not be words we use to create friendship or to express deep love.

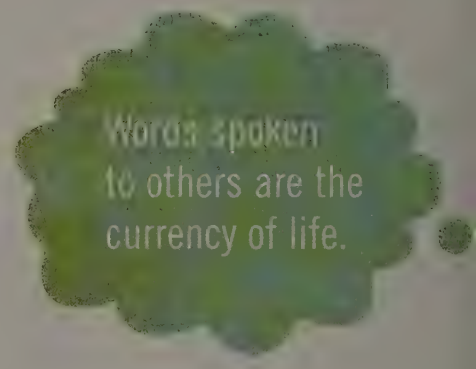
Eugene Peterson, one of the great wordsmiths of our day, offered an interesting suggestion one time. He said that if we were to take all of the words known to humankind and toss them up into the sky, they would settle back down into essentially two piles.

One pile would consist of those words that help us know things like the price of cabbage, or what level of octane fuel our car engine needs, or which parent is picking up Johnny from soccer. These would be words for *communication*. They are necessary and helpful—one might even say great. But they are not everything.

The other pile of words that would stack up are what Peterson calls words for *communion*. These are words that nurture intimacies, reveal beauty, develop trust, and share love. Words of communion are indispensable for our relationships. Without them, we live dull, flat lives. Our friendships go nowhere. Our conversations become full of uninteresting information.

Many individuals who are struggling in a relationship or who find their marriage "on the rocks," will often say (and believe) that they are not communicating well. This is partly true. In turn, they seek out a counselor to help them figure out

where the communication lines have broken down. What is interesting is that, more often than not, the missing piece in the couple's conversation is not words of communication. They are communicating quite well. They know and talk about who will pay the bills and where the house thermostat needs to be set. What



they lack are words of communion. They have fallen out of the practice of conversing with one another through the use of words that display love, trust, beauty, or intimacy. This is a far greater problem than some inability of theirs to merely communicate.

We often think communication is little more than transferring information from one mind to another. This is certainly the modern understanding. But the very essence of communication, according to its root meaning—*communicare*—is to share, to make common. What is common can no longer be just mine. It now belongs also to someone else. Conversation that communicates well acknowledges this shared dimension.

## Practice is required

Using words in conversation that express the deep realities of which Eugene Peterson speaks takes practice. One does not fall automatically into a mode of speech that is packed with words of communion. This takes time; it takes a lifetime of habit. When two people say repeatedly to one another, "I love you," they do so not because this is somehow unapparent to them. Whether their hearts are bursting with sudden passion or they are stuck in a rut of mutual neglect, they still know of their abiding love for one another. Yet uttering this simple phrase reminds them of the value of new discovery ahead. By putting their love into these three words, a couple is suggesting that there is more to the concept of love than they have already come to know. There is potentiality and refinement to their practice of love that present joy and happiness have not yet revealed. There is more goodness to come.

## Holy conversation

So what makes for holy conversation? In a world where nasty speech often gets the upper hand, what is it that will elevate our words to a level befitting the highest aspirations of the Christian life? Four special qualities come to mind.

**First**, we should remember the primary difference between an argu-

ment and a conversation. An argument always rests on having the answer. A conversation is grounded in the question.

Think of those times when you have been embroiled in an argument. The heat rises precisely because both sides believe they have the answer. A conversation is different. It is more open-ended, full of the spirit of inquiry. Have you ever noticed how many questions Jesus would ask in the course of a simple conversation? A good conversation partner does not act like a know-it-all who has the world figured out. He or she shares in a way that invites others to be full players in the conversation.

**Second**, we should never underestimate the value of restraint in our speech. Less is usually more when it comes to the marketplace of conversation. Even though we often believe that piling on more words will make us more interesting or our ideas more compelling, this is rarely the case. Jesus of Nazareth was a master at restraint. Sometimes the absence of more words from him frustrates us. We wish he had told us more so that we would know the full and plain truth. But more often than not, his restraint in speaking holds the conversation open for our full participation, still to this day.

**Third**, holy conversation happens when people listen well. When Mary pondered the words of Jesus

and treasured them in her heart, she was displaying what all of us could afford to do better—listen well. Few things frustrate the beauty of conversation quite like someone who will not listen, who only wants to talk. Not only is such behavior rude, it is self-centered in nature. If our communication—*communicare*—is to be shared and truly common, we must practice our listening skills.


**Fourth**, kindness makes for holy conversation. If we want to get anywhere in life, we are often told to be tough and cold in our dealings. This works to a point. But it certainly doesn't open up the world of give and take in which conversation makes its home. Being tough is relatively simple; showing kindness takes far more courage.

When I was a child, I thought people with money were something special. Later in life, I came to admire those who were really bright. Today, I cherish those who have kindness in their voice as they speak with others. I want to be more like them.

Holy conversation is not out of reach for any of us. It may be as close as the next words that come out of your mouth. 🌿

**Peter W. Marty** is senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa, and host of Grace Matters, the radio ministry of the ELCA. To learn more about the program and to hear Pastor Marty's holy conversations on-line, go to [www.gracematters.org](http://www.gracematters.org).





# *Good news!*

*You can't make this the "best Christmas ever"*

*by Kathleen Kastilahn*

I'm no angel, but I'm coming with familiar angelic assurance: "Fear not!" And I do bring good news: You can't make this the "best Christmas ever."

You can't—no matter how much you bake, wrap, decorate, party, give, visit, sing, worship, or even do acts of love. You can't, because God already did, 2,000 years ago and every year since. And God will do it again this year.

One wonders how we women, particularly, ever thought this task was ours and, with equal measures of obligation and delight and exhaustion, set about our Christmas busyness. We could delve into the annals of Victorian history, of course, but we don't really have to do more than read the cover lines on the magazines at the grocery check-out counter to know that the cheering of the culture continues.

I read *Unplug the Christmas Machine: How to Have the Christmas You've Always Wanted* years ago, when I was a young mom. It offered then-revolutionary ideas on how to stop the holiday frenzy, I recall, but still we women were the ones to flip the "off" switch. The control was still ours. That's just wrong.

We lose our way to the manger early on when we think that what we do makes Christmas come—in our homes and in our hearts. Listen to these words from a Nativity sermon: "They did not recognize what God was doing in the stable. With all their eating, drinking, and finery, God left them empty, and this comfort and treasure were hidden from them. Oh, what a dark night it was in Bethlehem that this light should not have been seen."

The preacher of this sermon was Martin Luther. Translator Roland Bainton, in his introduction to *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, observes that for Luther the great question was "why the Lord of all the universe should care enough about us mortals to take our flesh and share our woes." And that for Luther, "The condescension of God was the great wonder."

Luther was humbled by God's humility in the Incarnation. And as Martha Stortz reminds us in her Bible study (page 27): "Through

Jesus we know the meekness of a God who suffers with us, enveloping us in a Father's love."

The awe of this all makes me feel more foolish than frazzled when I consider the notion of my Christmas to-do list or of planning the Christmas I've always wanted. We certainly don't need to fret that we will fall short on making this Christmas the best. Rather, we should fear that we'll be too occupied with our holiday activities to recognize what God was doing in the stable, that we'll be the ones left empty at Bethlehem.

Compared with that, well, how can we judge a Christmas "white" or "blue" based even on our particular situation? We all have years when this holiday is particularly blessed—as ours was last year, with a first grandchild joyfully stretching out our family circle. Or when it is painfully bleak—as it is for those facing a difficult diagnosis or worrying about family far away, especially in war zones.



Read from this letter written December 17, 1943, by Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his parents: "For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I daresay it will have more meaning and will be observed with greater sincerity here in this prison than in places where all that survives of the feast is its name. . . .

"For the prisoner the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense. And that faith gives the prisoner a part in the communion of saints, a fellowship transcending the bounds of time and space."

Bonhoeffer reveals the "tempered strength" of the believer who knows, as Stortz writes, that "God became one of us to share our suffering and show us the pathways of peace" (page 27).

This is God's Christmas.

### To the manger

What should we do in these Advent days so the treasure of Christmas is not hidden from us, so we don't leave the manger empty?

Perhaps we start by simply and, yes, meekly receiving this gift of God-with-us with thanks for all the days of our lives—the days of gladness and of sadness that come to each of us. "Of the Father's love begotten," Jesus comes into our world, into our lives, embodying that love.

We know the story so well. Maybe too well?

A missionary I visited in Thailand showed me a painting on the wall of his seminary classroom. It was the Nativity, the work of Sawai Chinnawong, an internationally known Christian artist who was raised Buddhist.

I loved the bright depiction of a traditional village, complete with an elephant paying homage at the manger. But I missed the remarkable feature: The separation between heaven and earth of classical Buddhist art—a continuous jagged line—was broken. Heaven had opened into earth. God had come to the people here, now.

This image would startle a Buddhist, the professor pointed out. That our God comes to live with us should still amaze us.

Sawai's painting includes three people, presumably wise, bringing gifts. The first is a woman carrying a tray with a jar of water, a bowl of rice, and a fish on a plate. (Reminds me of the saying that if the wise men had been women they would have brought a casserole, among other things.)

That's a sign of how we are to respond to the amazing gift of God. We give back. But before we think about what that means for us this Christmas, let's listen again to Luther's sermon: "There are many of you in this congrega-

tion who think to yourselves: 'If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!' Yes, you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do the Lord Christ himself."

No one ever accused Luther of not speaking his mind. His blunt admonitions to his parishioners some 450 years ago can still direct us on our way to the manger.

We who have been given Christ don't have to compete with God, to try to make this Christmas the "best ever." We do have to care for real people in real ways.

Who is the "neighbor" that Luther tells us to serve? It's such an ancient question.

I love the answer we sing in the Ghanaian folk tune: "Neighbors are wealthy and poor, varied in color and race, neighbors are nearby and far away. These are the ones we will serve, these are the ones we will love; all these are neighbors to us and you" (*With One Voice* 765).

But it's here, among all these neighbors, that we can get confused and confounded and even crabby. How can we possibly pass along our Christmas gift of life in Christ with all these people?

#### A centered life

We know our giving is in our serving one another in community. But, oh, what a balancing act that can be! And before we know it we're in a rush again—rushing to do it all, struggling to do too much.

Where do we find time to knit prayer-filled stitches into a shawl for a new mother down the block? To coach the Sunday school children memorizing their lines for the pageant? To bake (and mail) family-favorite cookies for siblings far away? All the while, probably, keeping up with a full schedule at the office. It would be good, too, to get out for a walk if not to the gym. Sound familiar? We yearn for balance, the state-of-being those supermarket magazines also encourage us to strive for.

But Jack Fortin of Luther Seminary's Center for Lifelong Learning believes that even this seemingly good goal of living in balance puts us in peril. A balancing act, after all, is a precarious under-taking. Think about stepping along a high-wire. That's tension.

Fortin counsels that, instead, we should seek to center our lives.

"The alternative to a balanced life is a faithful life," he explains in his book, *The Centered Life*. "It is a life faithful, moment by moment, to the God in whom we live and move and have our being."

He says the problem with striving for balance is that "it keeps us self-absorbed, and the elements of our lives rarely stay in balance."

Centering our life means we won't get to everything on our Christmas to-do list. It means that we will listen each day for what God is calling us to do, whom God is calling us to be with. It means we will trust God's guidance and give up, humbly, even our most earnest plans and agendas.

You know—or maybe you don't, but I do—that even a desire to simplify Christmas can lead to disaster. I think back to the year I decided to forgo the expense and waste of commercial wrapping paper and, instead, made my own gift wrap from plain brown grocery bags with potato-stamp printed stars. I wound up in tears late on Christmas Eve with a mess on my hands and presents in plain boxes.

A department-store gift, on the other hand, can be a blessing for both giver and receiver. A nightgown was just that for my sister and me. We each gave the other a nightgown the first Christmas after our mother died—a reminder of her traditional gift to us during our

childhoods. The present, of course, was the presence of her love in our lives and of our desire to give that to each other in cloth as precious and as real as that which swaddled the Baby Jesus.

I hear echoes of the angels, themselves, in Fortin's telling us to "fear not" about perfect balance, but to live from our center in Christ.

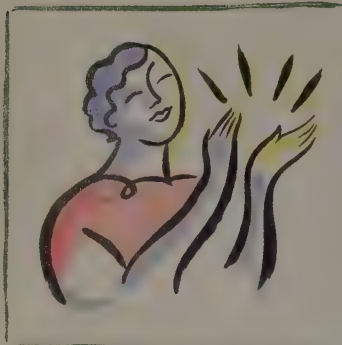
More practical advice comes straight into our kitchens—a "center" place for many women—from M. J. Smith, a Stephen Minister and dietitian who is a member of St. John Lutheran Church in Guttenberg, Iowa. Her book *Daily Bread* offers recipes for nourishing spirit and body. I asked her once about her preparations for Christmas. What gift did she want to bring to the celebration?

"Our goal is to renew our faith," she said. "To pass it on to the children in our lives." (And I'd add neighbors.) "With that as our focus, we can look at every activity or responsibility or event and see if it will help us on our way—or not."

With companions such as these to walk with us on our way these December days, I'm confident that when we do get to Bethlehem, we will recognize what God is doing. And that God will not leave us empty. 🌿

**Kathleen Kastilahn** is an associate editor of *The Lutheran* and a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Evanston, Ill.





WE RECOMMEND

## Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

### New workbook helps you Act Boldly

The words of the Women of the ELCA purpose statement commit us to “grow in faith and affirm our gifts.” Follow through on this commitment by using our new *Act Boldly* workbook to discover more about yourself and the ways you are faithful. With this free on-line workbook, you will be able to explore the bold lives of biblical, historical, and contemporary women. In addition to showing you how to create a personal purpose statement, the workbook will help you discover your boldness in three categories: teaching, advocating, and caring.

To learn more about how you can lead your group to act boldly through their gifts, download the *Act Boldly* workbook at [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org).

### Lutherans support Africa, Asia, and Middle East

Members of the ELCA are working to help meet the basic needs of people affected by unrest, war, and disasters overseas. As of August 2007, through ELCA International Disaster Response, Lutherans have provided a total of \$270,000 to support people in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Funds provide food, medicine, drinking water, emergency shelter, and other materials for survivors of disasters.

You can support Disaster Relief through Women of the ELCA by noting it on the memo line of your check. Mail your donation by sending your check to Women of the ELCA/Disaster Relief, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694.

### The basics of World Hunger

Want to know more about the ELCA's World Hunger, Disaster Response, and Stand With Africa programs? Visit [www.elca.org/hunger/basics](http://www.elca.org/hunger/basics) to view and download six PowerPoint presentations of various lengths and bonus material on the subjects.

The presentations and bonus material are also available on the new ELCA World Hunger *Go and Do Likewise* CD-ROM (free; item number 978-6-0002-1990-1). To request a single copy of the CD-ROM, call 800-638-3522. To request multiple copies for a multi-congregation event or synodical women's event, order through Augsburg Fortress. Call 800-328-4648 or order on-line at [www.augsburgfortress.org/elcahunger](http://www.augsburgfortress.org/elcahunger).

Visit [www.elca.org/hunger/basics](http://www.elca.org/hunger/basics) for more information, or contact them by e-mail at [hunger@elca.org](mailto:hunger@elca.org) or by phone at 800/638-3522, ext. 2764, ext. 2717, or ext. 2969.

### Hungry to change the world?

Then enter the Divine Chocolate recipe contest. Chocolate lovers can use their culinary skills to improve the lives of Ghanaian cocoa farmers by creating a recipe using Divine Chocolate. You have to hurry—submit your recipe on-line by December 15 for your chance to win! The grand prize is a trip to Washington, D.C. (and a basket filled with fair-trade Divine Chocolate)!

Find out more at [www.lwr.org](http://www.lwr.org) chocolate. Follow the links to enter your recipe and a photo of your creation.



## GRACE NOTES

# Manifold Gifts

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



**As our 20th anniversary** year comes to a close, there is still time for you to celebrate by making a contribution to our anniversary offering.

This offering stretches back to our beginnings in the mission societies of the 19th century, when women collected offerings to support the American church's early mission work. Our anniversary offering reflects efforts throughout the 20th century that established endowed funds, the interest on which continues to be used today for mission and ministry.

Half the money collected in the 20th anniversary offering will support the work of Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem and the Stand With Africa Water Project of the ELCA World Hunger Program that partners with the Lutheran World Federation to bring clean water to communities in Africa. The other half of the anniversary offering will support the ongoing work of Women of the ELCA.

If every one of our more than 7,000 units sent just \$20 for this anniversary offering, more than \$140,000 would be available for this good work. If every unit gave \$200 for this offering, the offering would exceed \$1.4 million. Imagine what would happen if every woman in every unit gave \$20 for this anniversary offering! The offering could easily reach \$4 million.

But it's not really a matter of numbers. This offering is about how we respond to God's manifold gifts to us. It tells us about how we view the resources

with which we have been entrusted. It's about our faith in God's ability to provide what we need.

Here are some ways each of our more than 7,000 units can help make the anniversary offering a reflection of our mission, one way in which women can act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

- Plan to collect an anniversary offering this month and in January 2008.
- Place a challenge before the women of your unit: Encourage every woman to contribute at least \$20, one dollar per year of Women of the ELCA.
- Let the women of your unit know about the ministries of Augusta Victoria Hospital and the Stand With Africa Water Project. Learn more at [www.womenoftheelca.org/20years](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/20years). Help each woman understand how her anniversary gift is one way in which she helps achieve our mission: mobilizing women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. Pray for these ministries.
- Invite others in your congregation to contribute. Perhaps some will contribute in memory of those once active in Women of the ELCA or a predecessor women's organization. Others might contribute to support Augusta Victoria Hospital or the Stand With Africa Water Project.
- Consider making gifts to the anniversary offering to honor friends and family this Christmas in lieu of material presents. 🌸

**Linda Post Bushkofsky** is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

Send your special 20th anniversary offerings by January 31, 2008, to Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Write "20th Anniversary" on your check memo line.





AMEN!

## Holy Time, Holy Patience

by Catherine Malotky

**Our cultural vision is** short-sighted, God. Patience is not a virtue our culture values. When our culture fixes its eyes on productivity and efficiency, we can only see productivity and efficiency.

But, dear God, a newborn is not efficient, and hours spent with babe to breast, or changing soiled diapers, or even playing mimic by sticking out your tongue is not productive, at least not as our common culture would name it.

Reading a favorite book for the fifth time tonight, or playing "Swing Me" as we walk along, or holding a frightened preschooler as the lightening flashes and the thunder rumbles is not something we value for the sake of our Gross National Product.

Yet these stages of life are holy, God, made so by your design.


In turn, the stories told by an ancient one, heard many times before, are critical to her wholeness, and critical for those of us who will survive beyond her. The time spent by her chair does not figure into any profit and loss statement. Yet this time is holy, God. How else will we find out what has come to mean so much to her? How else will we learn the stories we can tell once she is gone and we need to remember her?

When we are impatient with ourselves and those we love, might it be because we have lost sight of the wonder you have created all around us? Might our pace have been wound too tight, set too fast, by this world of ours, with all its expectations and demands?

Unwind us, God, so we might have the vision to see this beauty. Usher us into a world that is so much longer and broader than the next hour or year or even lifetime.

Hannah, year after year, begged God for a child, praying fervently at the temple. We would have given up. We might have become bitter—turning on the culture that shamed us for something we could not control. We might have withered and cowered—taking in that shame and turning it on ourselves. But Hannah was blessed with a long horizon. Hannah, in hope, prayed again and again, "wasting" her time and energy on a vision that drew her beyond herself.

How might we see with such hope, dear God? You ask us to trust you. Will you teach us to see with your eyes? Can we learn to see beyond our selves, beyond our cultural programming, into a world designed by you? Then our patience might be bold when it is rooted in your will and way. We might learn to say, "I have time for you," rather than breathlessly rushing by with, "Just a quick note—life is so busy!"

With your help, God, we might prune our busyness so we can honor the stages you have made so holy, to relish and embrace them. Then we will be patient, God, and in that patience, see your welcome. Then we will have time to wonder at your love. Amen. 

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky** serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been a editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



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Bible Study Leader Guides, Companion Bibles, etc.

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Women of the ELCA 



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# Be a part of what God is up to.

For 20 years, Women of the ELCA has committed to "grow in faith, affirm our gifts, support one another in our callings, engage in ministry and action, and promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world."\*

\*from the Women of the ELCA Purpose Statement

Women <sup>of the</sup> ELCA   
Celebrating 20 Years

## GIVING IS JUST A CLICK AWAY

You can contribute to the Women of the ELCA 20th anniversary any time of the day or night. Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) and click on "Make a Gift" under Quick Links to make a safe and secure donation by credit card. You can also give through your congregational unit or send a contribution directly. On the memo line of your check, write "20th Anniversary Gift" and mail to:

Women of the ELCA  
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## Put your gift where your faith is

*Celebrate this anniversary with a special offering.*

**Where your anniversary gift will go** Half the money raised through your 20th anniversary offering will support the work of two projects that were addressed by resolutions at the Sixth Triennial Convention in 2005. The other half will go toward the ongoing work of Women of the ELCA.

### STAND WITH AFRICA WATER PROJECT


Improved conservation and irrigation systems help bring life-giving clean water to rural communities in Zimbabwe. Your support helps women generate income, children stay healthy, and farmers grow better crops.

### AUGUSTA VICTORIA HOSPITAL, JERUSALEM

Augusta Victoria Hospital serves all patients regardless of religion, nationality, ethnic origin, or ability to pay. Your support can help the hospital keep its doors open and continue health services in surrounding villages.

*Both projects are supported through the Lutheran World Federation and the ELCA.*

For more information on any of our many ministries,  
**CALL 800-638-3522, EXT. 2730.**

the magazine of Women <sup>of the</sup> ELCA 

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